

REZENSION

Sarah Imhoff: Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism

*Sarah Imhoff. Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism.
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Reviewed by Marcus Pyka.

“Jewish hordes, ignorant of all patriotism, filthy, vermin-infested, stealthy and furtive in manner, too lazy to enter into real labor, too cowardly to face frontier life, too lazy to work as every American farmer has to work, too filthy to adopt ideals of cleanliness from the start, too bigoted to surrender any racial traditions or to absorb any true Americanisms” – this is how in 1912 the Reverend A.E. Patton described his visit to Ellis Island, the main port of immigration to the United States of America. And he recommended this view to his compatriots as well, to understand what he regarded as the pernicious impact of Jewish immigration to the country. Sarah Imhoff presents this telling quote at the beginning of a chapter about Jewish immigration programs in her fascinating study on gender and religion in U.S. history in the first quarter of the 20th century. She analyses the interplay of two crucial developments for Judaism in the new world: “how religion shaped American Jewish masculinity,” and “how masculinity shaped American Judaism” (p. 2). In several case studies, she looks on the way how Jews in the U.S. tried to claim that their faith was “a good, *American* religion” (i.e. a system of proper and respectable beliefs as opposed to a superstition, an inimical internationalism, or whatever other negative stereotypes existed) as well as that Jews were, in fact, masculine as opposed to allegedly bookish, sickly, effeminate weaklings, as many of those negative stereotypes claimed. Imhoff’s book thus contributes to a small number of studies that look into processes in which that particularly elusive of gender – masculinity – developed and constituted an important attempt to adapt to the challenges of the 20th century. In fact, on first glance, the quote from Reverend Patton, while being saturated with antisemitic topoi, does not seem to be gendered at all; only a very attentive reading reveals the many code words (e.g. “lazy,” “cowardly”) that indicate that for the Reverend, the Jews he saw arriving in the New World were all kinds of things, but no “real men”. What makes Imhoff’s study so interesting is the fact that most of the few studies on Jewish masculinity in this period so far had been focused on Europe and Palestine. She can show how Judaism in the peculiar circumstances of early 20th century U.S.A. was successfully adapting to a Christian, and particularly Protestant hegemony – although it would take until the aftermath of the Holocaust and into the Cold War that Jews were generally accepted as an essential part of a common “Judeo-Christian” Western heritage. Even more so she convincingly demonstrates the specifically American nature of this adaptation process, as exemplified in the conception of a Jewish rootedness in the land as well as of a pioneering, but non-aggressive Jewish manliness – and thus, how novel conceptions of masculinity were

essential in establishing Judaism within America. With these overall results, Imhoff is truly breaking new ground.

The book is divided into three parts, all exploring certain margins of American Judaism and of the Jewish population within the U.S. between 1900 and 1924. Following an extensive introduction to some of the main issues of historiography – including a very basic introduction to the topics of gender, race, and religion – Imhoff presents her argument in nine case studies, organized in three main themes. Part I looks into the establishment of Judaism as a “good” and “American” religion by building a proper Jewish-American theology, as well as the image of masculinity in the writings of four Jewish converts to Christianity. All of them turned to missionary work, including the intriguing case of Samuel Freuder, who would eventually convert back to Judaism. Part II discusses in four case studies the interconnection of land and bodies. The first one analyses the short-lived Galveston movement of settling Jewish immigrants in the rural areas of the South and the West. The subsequent three chapters look into attempts to connect U.S. Jewish life with the American past, present, and future: first, the past, by a minor discourse on Jewish identification with Native Americans; then with an agriculturalist, body-oriented present in form of Baron de Hirsch’s agricultural school in Woodbine, New Jersey, and physical exercises like calisthenics, and thirdly with the future, in form of the development of American Zionism as markedly different from European Zionist movements. Part III presents the case of negotiating the Abnormal and the Criminal, and what this tells us about contemporary ideas of Jewish lives and Jewish men’s bodies; the three case studies here claim that Jewish crime was generally seen as distinct and as distinctly Jewish. Crucial for this assessment by Jews and non-Jews alike was the perception of the physical shape and demeanor of Jewish men, as exemplified in the debate about the alleged but unsubstantiated claim of a high percentage of Jews among criminals in New York city, as well as in the high profile cases of Leo Frank (1913), and of the Leopold and Loeb hearing in 1924. All these cases connect the issues of religion, sexuality and manliness. Imhoff concludes that Jewishness was not considered as synonymous with being criminal as professed by some Antisemites such as Reverend Patton, but that even when crimes were associated with Jews as Jews, these “Jewish crimes” were considered more cunning than violent, and thus not as “manly.” Even in the extreme case of the ruthless murder by Leopold and Loeb, where there was no way to deny brutality, the issue was “solved” by a tacit agreement of all sides to place the perpetrators beyond the margins of a Jewish normalcy. Thus, in her overall assessment Imhoff argues, that the first two or three decades of the 20th century became crucial in establishing a variety of images of Jewish masculinity, which converged an image of Jewish men as being gentler than non-Jewish men, while not being effeminate – an imagination that still has a strong impact today.

Imhoff makes the point that, building on the works of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, looking specifically at the margins of a group allows for a more thorough exploration of norms and values, without falling into the trap of oversimplification: “Gender has always been messy, complex, and multifaceted” (p. 273). However, while she is very convincing in her overall statement as well as in many of her specific observations, I am not convinced that the book at large achieves the same goal. Imhoff claims she does not want to provide an argument about a development, but rather a panorama of the con-

stitution of the American Jewish condition with regards to masculinity during the period in question. However, particularly the end-point 1924 – the Leopold-Loeb-Hearing and the closing of the United States to prospective Eastern European Jewish immigrants after the Johnson-Reed Act – appears rather arbitrary, as it does not convince as an intrinsically meaningful turning point for her argument. At the same time the impression of a static condition of Judaism might also resolve from the absence of any meaningful engagement with topics such as the First World War, home front propaganda, and their impact on Jewish masculinities in the book. This lacuna, together with the sole emphasis on cases more or less on the margins of American Jewry stymies her efforts to present a comprehensive panorama. While she repeatedly reiterates her main arguments, it seems to be at times more a rhetorical connection of the case studies than an assessment really grounded in analytical findings; these reiterations also make for a somewhat repetitive reading. Even more so as not all case studies are equally supportive of her arguments. Certainly, some cases, in particular the chapters on the Galveston movement, on the role of calisthenics, or on the Leo Frank case, strongly support her case, but too often a deeper engagement with her sources, and a better contextualization would have strengthened her main argument substantially. To give just two examples: the emphasis on the rationality of Jewish thought is not a specifically 20th century American phenomenon but characteristic for modern Judaism and particular for the reform movement. Similarly, the acculturated American Jews in the early 20th Century did not differ much from the vast majority of European Jews in their support for the Zionist cause, which emanated less from the desire to settle in Palestine themselves, but rather to support those persecuted in Eastern Europe. Instead, it might have been interesting to see how “Europe” (when the term specifically refers to Russia and Romania) was constructed in her sources in an orientalist manner of sorts, to bolster the “American” credentials of her authors. And instead of having two separate, but similar cases on false claims of sexual crimes in the last two chapters, it might have been more interesting to see Imhoff’s analytical insights used on the rhetoric of the prohibition era, where Jews stood accused of being leading in gang crime like Mayer Lansky, and dominant in bootlegging where for instance, Lee Levy’s *Black Cock Vigor Gin* was blamed to play a crucial role in rape and sexual violence. Nevertheless, these are quibbles regarding minor aspects.

Thus, while the book overall triggers some reservations, its main argument – that the beginning of the 20th century as a crucial period for establishing a particular, but American Jewish masculinity – nevertheless appears convincing and indeed, worthy of further elaboration. The study of gender in Jewish studies, and in particular of Jewish masculinities still requires more research. Sarah Imhoff’s book offers a substantial inspiration and insight to carry this further.

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About the author Marcus Pyka is Associate Professor of History at Franklin University Switzerland in Sorengo-Lugano (Ticino). In his book *Jüdische Identität bei Heinrich Graetz*, Göttingen 2009, he showed how central masculinity and respectability are for the construction of a Jewish identity in Heinrich Graetz' masterful *History of the Jews* (1853-1873). He currently works on a cultural history of treason.